

In Memory of My Beloved Grandaunt

On February 22, 1910, Dr. Shiu Ying Hu was born in a poor farmer family, at the village (袁家窪), southeast of Xu Zhou (徐州), Jiangsu Province (江蘇) China. The parents named her: Hu Xing Lian (胡興廉); the child's mom (胡權氏) asked baby's father (胡方一) to go to town to buy a herb medicine for preventing umbilical cord infection, because the couple already had three babies who died of such infection before, and there was only one 10-years old boy (胡興家, my grandfather) who survived in the family. When the little girl grew up about four years old, one day, several relatives from the village carried her father back from the town; he died of cholera disease. A young kid lost her father because the family had no money to save him. This could be the reason for the little girl to become so interested in Chinese herb medicine later.

After the husband passed away, all family and field work became the tremendous burden to the family, especially to the mother. She wanted to save her two kids by sending them to the village elementary school established by an American Presbyterian church. In 1919, Hu Xing Lian (胡興廉) moved to the Zhen Xin Middle School (正心中學), where her teacher made a name change for her as Hu Shiu Ying (胡秀英). In 1922, Dr. Hu studied at Zhen Xing High School (正心高中). After graduation in June 1926, Dr. Hu was hired as a teacher at the High School (正心高中). All those education was supported by the American Southern Presbyterian Missionary. Dr. Hu continued teaching until going to college. The Christine education had built the foundation for Dr. Hu's early life and her goal for the future.

In 1929, Dr. Hu was accepted by Ginling College at Nanjing, the capital of China at that time. After she graduated from the college in 1933, she returned to teaching in Zhen Xing High School (正心高中). In 1935, Dr. Hu went to Lingnan University (嶺南大學) in Guangzhou and finished her master degree under the supervision of Prof. F.A. McClure (莫古禮) in 1937. In the same year, the Sino-Japanese War and shortly afterwards World War II started. Many Chinese colleges and universities moved from east coast to Sichuan (四川) province. Dr. Hu was hired to teach at Hua Xi Xie He University (華西協和大學) in Chengdu (成都). After World War II, she was admitted in 1946 with full scholarship to Radcliffe College to pursue a PhD program under the supervision of Prof. E.D. Merrill (梅爾) at Harvard University. Based on hard work and many years of teaching and research experience, she quickly completed her PhD in 1949.

As many other Chinese students would wish, Dr. Hu was planning to return to China. Due to uncertainty of the Chinese government, she decided to stay in the United States, was hired by Harvard University for botanical research until her retirement. Between 1949 and 1975, Dr. Hu always wanted to return to China, where her mother, brother and brother's family located, but she could not entered as a American citizen, but she did not give up. In 1968, she accepted an invitation from Dr. Andrew Roy at Chung Chi College (崇基學院), The Chinese University of Hong Kong, to teach botany at the Biology Department and retired there in 1975. In Hong Kong, every time when she collected plant specimens, she always made five copies, for distribution to the herbaria at Harvard University, Chinese University, Royal Botanic Garden (Kew), Smithsonian Institution (D.C.), and Institute of Botany (Beijing). Over 20,000 sets were collected in Hong Kong.

In the summer of 1976, Dr. Hu had the first chance to visit China as a Hong Kong resident. She went there with a travel group, and visited a few major cities. That was the first time I met her at Jinling Hotel of Nanjing (南京). She dressed in simple clothes, no makeup, and no jewelry. She wanted to get to know us and close to us. After China and United States established a diplomatic relationship, Dr. Hu visited China frequently. She started a plan to help Hu's family kids and other children come to the U.S. for higher education.

In 1981, I was fortunately able to go to the U.S.; I had spent more time living with Dr. Hu than anyone else. I had observed and learned a lot from her. Dr. Hu lived a very simple life with normal schedule at Boston as below:

About 5:00AM, got up, washed, drank several glasses of tea (with milk and honey), read

About 7:00AM, took breakfast (toast, boil egg, tea)

About 7:30AM, drove to office at Cambridge, Harvard University, drank a cup of coffee, chatted with colleagues and friends, and worked.

About 12:00AM, went to the lunch room for lunch (bought discount bread, ham, or turkey, made her own sandwich)

About 1:00PM, took a nap (slept on office floor on old chair cushion)

About 2:00PM, went to lunch room for a cup of tea and finished work at around 6:00PM.

About 6:30PM, drove back home for dinner, after meal, set down and watched TV or played with my kids. If she watched TV, she would quickly fell into sleep; I could hear her snore back in kitchen when I washed dishes.

About 9:00PM, went to her bedroom for sleep.

Dr. Hu kept this kind of life style from Monday through Saturday, except Sunday for the church, day after day, year after year. Many of you may ask: how could Dr. Hu live so long? Did she have any secrets? The answer is: a healthy mental status, working with a balance diet. Dr. Hu loved to work at office, but sometimes she also enjoyed friends gathering. During Thanksgiving holiday, she always invited many friends and visiting scholars to her home. In the early morning, she started cooking a large turkey. By lunch time, guests arrived and started Thanksgiving dinner; everyone enjoyed the delicious meal, but I was so tired of washing many dishes. Now when I think about it, I realize that happiness from guests reflected love from the host, Dr Hu.

Dr. Hu always wanted to help others, no matter who you were; if you were interested to learn, she would spent time with you. But I and some other relatives were mandatory to learn English with her during breakfast when we first arrived in the U.S.; we set down in front of a TV and watched morning news, and she would teach us new words. Dr. Hu was not only a great teacher, but also a good Christian. She took me to the church, and led me to believe in God. When I grew up in China, I was an atheist. Dr. Hu had difficulty to convince me to become a Christian. One day, she said to me: "Do you know why I named you after Thomas in the Bible?" When Thomas touched Jesus' wounds, he stopped doubting, and believed Jesus is the son of God. From Dr. Hu, you could feel God's blessings.

Dr. Hu has left us, but her spirit will always live in our hearts. If we can learn one thing from her, that will be giving love to others, especially to poor and disadvantaged people. We will make this world more peaceful, educated and civilized.

May God bless Dr. Shiu Ying Hu!

Thomas Hu
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